

SB-321 - Proposed Infant and Toddler Development Approach for New Haven: Focus on the Parents

What is this SB-321 About?

The proposed Infant and Toddler Development Bill focusing on Parents Leadership aims at supporting and building the capacity of parents and other adults who care for young children to learn practical things they can do every day at home to improve infant and toddler development. Specifically, this Bill will:

1. Provide parents [including mothers, fathers, grandparents raising grandchildren, foster and adopted parents] and other adults caring for infants and toddlers **with the opportunity to learn about child development milestones and practical high quality child development daily activities** that fit into their daily routines and cultural realities.
2. **Develop and designate parents as: Peer-Mentors, Peer-Leaders, and Peer-Learners** who will be prepared with necessary and meaningful information, skills sets, and tools to be more confident and able to facilitate guided conversations on quality parenting for their peers in a supportive network aimed at changing parenting culture, including increasing Pre-K experience for children.
3. **Improve rapid development of the brain architecture of infants and toddlers** to have essential capacity to learn and function appropriately in ways that make them develop healthy body, emotions and minds for successful experience in preschool, elementary school and adult life.

SB-321 will be piloted in the City of New Haven and evaluated for replications in other municipalities.

Why do we need this Bill?

Chronic poverty and low socioeconomic status are associated with disparities in a child's physical and behavioral health, intellectual growth and development, and educational achievement, particularly among racial and ethnic minority populations, according to two reports of the U.S. Surgeon General on mental health. The rapidly body of research on brain development makes it very clear that a strong positive parent-child relationship is essential for a child's overall development, especially mental and behavioral development, especially in the early years of life. In addition, a positive and capable parent can buffer children from some of the negative impacts of chronic stress and adversity.

The Harvard Center on the Developing Child has focused its current research and policy efforts exactly at this early period of infant and toddler development and teaches us that we need to strengthen parenting capacity as well as the capabilities of other adults who care for and teach our youngest children.

Most Infant and toddler care and education – beyond that provided by a child's parental caregivers – currently occurs in childcare or early care settings. We know that excellent care is being provided in some settings, but that funding and other challenges have resulted in too many settings where the care and learning environments are mediocre at best.

Yet in every block and neighborhood in our cities and towns, we have newborns, infants and toddlers – especially those born into poor families – where the level of care is not appropriate to support the rapid development of brain architecture and functions essential to healthy development and a successful experience in preschool and early elementary school. Adverse experiences in the early years have been shown by research to contribute to significant numbers of children who are not kindergarten-ready and who have behavioral challenges leading to school performance problems, special education needs, and later engagement in our juvenile justice and correctional institutions. Also, inadequate and lack of quality parenting significantly contribute to cases of child neglect and some child abuse cases that increase our child welfare cost. These alternative factors that are associated with poor parenting result in avoidable costs/harms to our children, families and tax payers. We can certainly make a difference!

How does this Bill impact existing Infant and Toddlers programs?

We are fortunate to have some excellent Infant and Toddlers parenting programs. These programs are delivered by professionals and include: Nurturing families, All our Kin, Minding the Baby, Family Resource Center and Circle of Security parenting. We will work with these organizations as well as the MOMs partnership that address maternal depression and workforce development to develop and implement New Haven's pilot initiative to equip parents with positive quality parenting and sound early childhood development abilities. This approach will enable parents and other adults who care for infants and toddlers to effectively invest on developing emotionally, physically and socially healthy infants and toddlers in a very cost-efficient way, which can be replicated in other places.

While we must continue to increase access, quality and affordability of early care and education in the City of New Haven, we view parents, as a natural asset and 1st teachers of their children, and we intend to support and assist them to know how to better develop their children to be successful in life.

How will this Bill help Infants and Toddlers and their Parents?

In New Haven, there are 7297 children ages 0-3 years [2010 Census Data]; and 77 babies were born to mothers younger than 18 years in 2010 alone. Their teen mothers also need healthy developmental interventions and support coupled with their children's need for quality parenting. We are aware that other municipalities in our State are experiencing similar challenges and lessons to be learned from pilot could inform relevant policies and practices needed to transform the outcomes for our children.

Why will this Bill make a difference – what makes it unique to succeed?

Our approach is to develop diverse parents as leaders to train their peers by facilitating guided conversations [i.e. the natural ways people learn from one another] focused on child development and daily routine practices in a social network of five to six parents for 12 weeks [3 months]. We will recruit parents from the neighborhoods and develop them as 'Parent Mentors and Parent Leaders' to start facilitating quality parenting conversations to change parenting cultures in their neighborhoods. During the 3 months learning experience, parents will have the opportunity to share and learn from their peers in a secure and supportive network of six peers, promising authentic

solutions to address the challenges they face through the facilitated conversations by their peer-leaders. The use of 'guided conversation method and peers' in this learning experience allows parents that participate in this program to share the promising solutions they learn with their friends, neighbors and families beyond those already in their network, thus enabling more parents to improve their parenting behaviors and overall culture.

We will draw upon the parents already involved in some of the early child development programs mentioned before, and work with the programs to engage, train, empower and support the parents to lead in the implementation of this initiative and build the community capacity needed for success.

This is consistent with the two-generational thinking emerging in Connecticut and across our country.